

nature and role  
of woman

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Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

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MARIA DE LOURDES PINTASILGO

PRIMEIRA MINISTRA

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT OF A RESEARCH PROGRAM ON  
THE NATURE AND ROLE OF WOMAN

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INTRODUCTION

A. Some fundamental remarks on method are essential before starting a more detailed analysis of the subject.

1. The whole field of woman's role in the world is a very complex one, and must include a wide range of contributions from different disciplines. To approach it from only one angle can lead to a narrow view and even to serious mistakes. We must therefore realize the need for a more comprehensive approach in our thinking and our study.
2. Just as in any other field of human knowledge, we cannot make statements without sufficient information. To be oneself a woman is not enough! For a study of woman (especially among women) strict objectivity is a basic requirement.
3. Our study of woman is not aimed at creating a feminist society. On the contrary, what we aim at is to have women fulfil their own personal vocation and task, in harmonious relationships among themselves and with men, fully involved in the structures of society.
4. Certain concepts about the role of woman that were widespread 20 or 30 years ago need to be considered again in the light of present knowledge. (E.g. woman as "the lover", as sign of cosmic fruitfulness, as life-giver). Often the intuitions underlying these concepts were valid, but not sufficiently verified. In many cases modern research has come to the same results by its own methods. Being purified of a certain moral and sentimental colouring, these concepts can now become a valid basis for an existential approach to woman.
5. We cannot longer take a few abstract ideas and deduce from them our view of woman. We need to start from reality, from the woman as a human person, seeing her as she is and appears in the multiple relationships that define their insertion in life and society.
6. Today we realize that nothing can be grasped in isolation. Everything exists in relation to surrounding reality. Our understanding of any one thing and especially of the human being, consequently depends on our insight into its relationships.

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B. Any study of woman must therefore take into account the whole person, in her total situation. This means:

a. the person as she is and appears in her bodily and psychological make-up and becoming ("devenir"):

Biology

Psychology

b. the person as she is in her relationships with other people and in the historical context:

Sociology

History

c. the person as she appears in the minds of other people (as reflected in the artistic imagination):

Literature

Cinema

d. the person as she is in her natural being. This is not an independent study but should be built on the elements given above and worked out in the way proper to:

Philosophy

e. the person as she is in the various religious traditions. As is the case with philosophy, this is not independent of secular knowledge, but is pursued in the way that is proper to the realm of

Theology

C. Any serious study of the role of woman requires therefore simultaneous consideration of the relevant facts in all these fields, and their interaction, in order to achieve a balanced synthesis.

In some fields there are good books and articles, though very often they overstress their own approach. There is as yet no adequate synthesis of the whole field. But there is in the world today a consistent development of thinking to which we as an international movement based on the nature and task of woman could make a definite contribution.

Without aiming to be exhaustive, I shall try to give a brief survey of the topics which seem to me most relevant in these various fields. This is not a comprehensive summary, and as I shall be making statements in a very condensed form they may sometimes lack the necessary nuance. But I leave that for the further stage of our work together.

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I. BIOLOGY - PSYCHOLOGY

I am not going into detail about these fields; I want only to indicate two main lines of research.

1. Biology points to the undeniable fact that woman is made to conceive. There is a physical determination of the whole being by the requirements of this fact. The capacity to conceive is deeply linked with certain special physical aptitudes and with certain attitudes towards life. The existential approach we are looking for obliges us to take this into account in working out the role and meaning of woman's life in the world.
2. Psychology has to be seen in its interdependence with physiology. (The capacity to conceive has also its psychological aspect). We need to see woman (and man too) in terms of the dynamic interplay between physical and psychosomatic determinations and free and modifiable psychological attitudes. What we look for in the study of the psychology of woman is a general interior attitude towards life revealed both on the conscious and unconscious level.

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## II. SOCIOLOGY

Here we should perhaps try to draw up a cross-section of woman's situation in life today. We would need to look at: women and work, women and family life, young women and their interests, women in civic life, etc. I should like to mention some trends which seem to me significant.

1. The coming of age of women, if it is an accomplished fact in Western countries, is still on its way in more than half of the world. This coming of age is achieved in widely varied cultural and social circumstances. What is happening in these countries can reveal interests, abilities, potentialities (or handicaps) in the nature of woman which the gradual transition that took place in the West has hidden.

Just two examples:

- a. basic interest and wisdom of women in African countries in political affairs, in spite of illiteracy;
- b. studies already made in the West of the situation of working women in regard to the family, compared with studies made of the situation of women in family life in both Africa and Asia, may lead to a broader understanding of the much-discussed subject of the relation of women to work and the family.

2. There is a clear evolution of the feminist trend in the West as the situation of women in society becomes more stable (as reflected in percentages of women in labor force, of married women working outside the home, of girls in professions or in higher education). As the situation stabilizes, the indications show that women for certain ways of life or type of job may become an indication of the task women are naturally inclined to fulfill.

To take one concrete example: though in most Western countries the technical professions (engineer, architect) are open to women, very few women enter them. It would be a great help to know if this fact is still a part of tradition and "social inhibitions" or if it corresponds to something deeper.

3. One aspect of the evolution of the feminist trend which has an importance all its own is the broadening of the concept of participation in public life.

In the face of new conditions in the developing countries, and in the light of the importance being placed on the human (personal) element in structures and institutions, the concept "participation in public life" has broadened.

In current terminology, "public life" is no longer merely political life, but includes all organized forms of community activity. The care and concern of the woman for all the vital needs of the person can find a new scope in the organized activities of the community which have the same aim. When women fight for their right to participate in public life, they are claiming a right to do something which is inherent in their whole approach to life. At the same time, service and all the activities which have the character of service acquire a new value through being a form of participation in public life.

4. There is a growing awareness of the potential force women represent in the world today.

Several indications of this trend are:

- a. the multiplication of effective and dynamic women's organizations which give specific training for a definite purpose. E.g. the All-Pakistan Women's Association is promoting a complete revolution in the way of living of the women of that country; in Argentina the 200 existing women's organizations are working together on projects which aim to reach the whole country; in Japan women have met recently to study the conditions of life for women of the new generation; women are also forming organizations for regional co-operation, such as the South-East Asian Women's Association and the All-African Women's Association . . .
- b. In the last years on all the continents there have been held a growing number of meetings dealing with the role or the position of woman in society.
- c. We may note the proposal made in 1961 by the Polish delegate to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women that there be set up an International Institute of Research to study the "services rendered by women to society" and "the influence of society on woman". Because of the thorough and systematic way it works, and because there is no longer much need to fight for women's rights, this commission is in fact becoming a kind of permanent research body, at least for certain fields.
- d. UNESCO has included in its social sciences program a special study of new sociological methods which can help to evaluate the social condition of woman and the relation of her nature to historical and cultural conditions - suggested by the results of previous studies on the quality of woman's vote and other aspects of her participation in political life.

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### III. HISTORY

Our main concern with the historical approach is not to discover "great women of the past" - though their lives may be very inspiring to us - but rather to give the necessary perspective to current trends. These trends show their true relevance in the light of general historical developments and more particularly of the development of the interpretation of woman's role in society. Our vision of woman's role at any given time is always relative to prevailing philosophical views and to public opinion concerning women. The realization of this relativity has led us to try to put historical data in the widest possible context.

I mention a few fields in which it seems to me that research could lead to very interesting results:

1. The study of the history of different civilizations and cultures and of the role women have played in them. I am not thinking so much of primitive societies as of civilizations with more developed cultures (the Asian countries, for instance). Such a study (or series of studies) might eventually lead to the discovery of a common basis for woman's involvement with her social environment.
2. The study of the history of Europe and of the role women have played in it. We find here, in fact, a complex, varied, even tortuous development of the relationships between the sexes. However, this very complexity and variety may already be an indication of a continuous interplay between the sexes, illustrating the need to study the nature and task of woman not in isolation but in relation to that of man.
3. The study of comparative religion, especially in the mythical elements of religion.
4. The history of the Church. The history of the Church being closely related with the history of Europe, this will be partly covered by point 2, yet the status of women in the Church merits special attention.

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#### IV. LITERATURE

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Literature mirrors its time, crystallizes latent feelings and attitudes. It shows unconscious feelings towards the position of women in society. It often provides indications of future trends, which develop as latent attitudes become conscious and determine public opinion and behaviour.

Possible fields of research might be:

1. Postwar literature, which has a twofold interest:
  - a. in some cases illustrating the dependence of human behaviour on social conditions - may clarify the connection between the essential elements of the nature of woman and the surrounding world;
  - b. in other cases, where social context has been deeply shaken, letting the human person (therefore woman too) appear in the specificity of her elementary concerns, aspirations and conflicts.
2. Russian literature since "de-Stalinization". Previously, all literature was party-motivated and therefore could not convey a message with enough objectivity for our study. Two points may be worth special attention:
  - a. in spite of indoctrination to the contrary, do specific aspects of the role and task of woman still appear?
  - b. is there already a new physiognomy of woman built up by Marxism?
3. Existentialist literature in its apparent indifference towards women as such has a tremendous interest. Some factors already pointed out:
  - a. relation "woman-child": refusal of conceiving and absence of child-fact in womans' life leads to complete human annihilation of women;
  - b. relation "woman-society": indifference to the surrounding world (living isolated in a room, no sense of home, disrespect for material things, absence of others in personal conflicts) leads to madness;
  - c. relation in the couple: withdrawal of woman from her conceiving role kills in the long run the nature of man (he becomes incapable of changing the world . . . ).

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## V. PHILOSOPHY

A philosophical synthesis of the anthropology of the sexes is still in its beginnings.

Today attempts are being made on scientific foundations, to study the human being in its basic and irreducible duality. This means it is impossible to speak in today's anthropology of a neutral human being who then happens to be man or woman. Any study of the human being has to take its existence as man or woman as the starting point.

Some points concerning our approach:

1. We are not looking for a set of special feminine qualities or capacities. What we want to grasp is the central attitude of woman which is decisive for her definition as a human being; we want to discover how this human being who is a woman apprehends reality. (It seems possible to say here that the woman apprehends the world as being in need of love and care while the man apprehends it as the object of his work. Thus the fundamental experience for man is the resistance of the world while for the woman it is its value).
2. If man and woman are two possibilities of the human being, then it is meaningless to look for opposite qualities in them, as has so often been done. There is no symmetry, no complementarity, in the sense of two sets of elements which correspond one to one.
3. The face-to-face relationship between man and woman is a very important element in the definition of the nature and task of woman. Marriage, while the most complete experience of this relationship, is not the only one and practically all situations of women in the world have some aspects of it.

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## VI. THEOLOGY

The concept of woman and her role in the various religious traditions is an important factor in a comprehensive study of woman.

For the west, this involves a careful study of the various elements of Judae-Christian tradition. In line with recent ecumenical trends,

it is important to consider the theology of the Eastern Churches on the point; also the exegetical and other studies sponsored by the World Council of Churches; and the particularly full bibliography of the Lutheran Churches on the subject. The Catholic Church is rather poor in literature on a theology of woman, but some recent attempts incorporate modern historical and sociological studies along with modern exegesis.

For the Moslem world, the study of theological teachings should be seen in relation to the historical and social position of women. Buddhism and Hinduism offer rich material for study.

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Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

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